

Pirani

Jamal Abro (1924-2004)

Translated from Sindhi by: Hashoo Kewalramani

Jamal Abro (1924-2004) is one of the pioneers of Sindhi fiction. He came to the literary forefront immediately after Independence and infused a new consciousness into Sindhi literature. Jamal Abro has written only a handful of stories, but he has exerted enormous influence on the modern Sindhi short story. Shaikh Ayaz singles out 'Pirani' for praise: "I don't know who made the distinction between poetry dances while prose walks. While reading 'Pirani', I felt that even prose can dance. In the beginning, 'Pirani' begins with a musical note and little bells begin to tinkle in the air. Suddenly, there is a piercing cry and one can see the story dancing on red-hot coals."

The Brohis were coming down from the hills. The winter had just set in. The cold, dry wind was sweeping down the dust and the gravel ahead of them.

They had two or three bullocks and one camel. Two dogs with wagging tails followed them. The men were barefooted, their shalwars (trousers) short and torn. On their heads they wore conical, embroidered caps full of dust and dirt. The women donned long robes with pretty embroidered designs now shredded and fading away as a result of long wear. On the bullocks they had loaded huge sacks full of twine and ropes twisted out of goat's hair. The young children sat huddled on the sacks, the parents driving the animals with their sticks as they kept humming, "Hee, hoon, hee, honn...." with their beards they looked handsome and dignified, but penury-stricken and weather-bitten.

They pitched their camp on a secluded spot where they distributed pieces of dry bread. From another cloth bag they took out some lumps of dried curd which they put in pitchers full of water. Each one gulped down a few draughts. Little Pirani, hardly nine years old, clapped her hands as she cried, "We are now in Sindh! We will have such good things and so many!" Her father took off his cap and scratched his head full of lice. The mother looked annoyed. Other children were also dreaming of the good and sweet things awaiting them on the plains. In the valley of Sindh, they built for themselves small shacks made of hay. They slept on hay and put on slippers made of hay. They sold the ropes and bamboo sticks. Sometimes, they starved by turn.

The winter was over. It was time to return to the hills. The poor children went without good things. Pirani's father looked at his wife's face meaningfully. There was anger and desolation in the glances they exchanged. The wife felt scared and looked at Pirani's shirt which she had washed only that morning. There was no defiance in her silent, miserable eyes.

Pirani's father approached the neighboring village

and greeted the people with a loud, 'salamalaikum'. He asked, "Brothers, does any body need a girl in marriage?" He meant to sell his little daughter.

For the Sindhi peasant it is not easy to get a wife. Many girls are pledged as soon as they are born. It costs money to have a wife. May Allah have mercy on all! Lalu's father looked at his adolescent son who had a husky voice and the bare trace of a beard. Both Lalu and his father accompanied the Brohi to his hamlet. The Brohi dogs barked as they saw the Sindhi strangers approaching. Pirani, her hair loose and her back uncovered, ran and held her mother tightly by the shirt. Lalu's father felt her body. Pirani's father, anxious to strike a good bargain, exhorted, 'she has lots of flesh, she is no weakling!' the dogs would not stop barking and they kept it up till they had followed the strangers back to the outskirts of the hamlet. The dogs then wagged their tails as if they had done their duty.

Outside the hamlet, after considerable haggling the bargain was struck for sixty rupees! The Brohis were now getting ready to return to the hungry hills. They pulled down the shacks and loaded the bullocks. The children kept chattering about the hills and the babul trees on the hills.

Lalu's village was on the way. Pirani's mother walked abreast, almost touching her daughter, while the father offered his finger for Pirani to hold. 'are we returning home?' asked Pirani. The father nodded. He could feel a corrosive void turning and twisting within him. The mother felt as if something heavy were hammering within her breast, trying to get out.

Lalu's people were waiting. As they drew nearer, Pirani's mother twitched convulsively and clasped her daughter. Lifting her high, she pressed Pirani to her bosom. The mother and daughter were panting, their hearts pounding fast, their eyes panic-stricken. Others stood around them. The father with his trembling hands lurched forward and tore away his daughter with a look of finality. The mother broke down, her heart crushed, her very vitals cut into

pieces. She screamed, 'Pirani, oh, my little Pirani!'. The girl shrieked back. The birds flew away in panic. Lalu's father took hold of Pirani who lay huddled on the ground. Pirani's father was sobbing, his tears flowing down his cheeks and through his beard to the ground. But he was holding his trembling wife and pulling her back. The caravan started moving. Pirani was hysterical, crying for her father and mother. The mother was being dragged away, but her loud lament rent the air from afar. 'Oh! Allah! my Pirani, baby Pirani, may the hills be on fire, may Sindh prosper, oh, my little Pirani!'

They dragged the struggling girl inside her new home. But she was slipping away from their hands, kicking, biting, screaming and bouncing like a rubber

ball. Lalu ran inside and soon brought a piece of jaggery which was put into Pirani's mouth. But the sweet came out gurgling. The child's delicate throat was hoarse with cries. Between tears and hiccups she kept moaning about her father and mother. In vain, Lalu was in fury now. He brought out a dagger and opening his eyes wide, he thundered, 'Now, will you shut up before I carve you in pieces?' Little Pirani, rolling on the dust, gave a scream with all that was left of her strength. The goat in the courtyard pricked up her ears and started licking her kid. A woman hugged her daughter in fright.

Yes, Pirani is still alive today. One of her sons is a policeman, and the other a life convict in a prison.

Questions for Comprehension:

1. Why did Pirani's father need to sell her?
2. What was the reaction of Pirani's mother?
3. Why was Pirani's father so unfeeling?
4. Was Pirani of a marriageable age?
5. Why does the writer mention that Pirani now had grown up sons, one a police man and the other a convict?

Glossary:

<i>Twine:</i>	strong thread made by twisting strands of fibre
<i>Penury stricken:</i>	affected by poverty
<i>Weather-bitten:</i>	people affected by harsh weather
<i>Hamlet:</i>	A group of houses or a small village
<i>Jaggery:</i>	molasses or 'gur'